Understanding Trauma and COVID-19: What School Professionals Can Do to Help

Terri Sisson, EdS
Educational Assessment Advisor
PAR, Inc.

Carrie Champ Morera, PsyD, NCSP, LP
Project Director
PAR, Inc.
Presentation Goals

1. Define trauma
2. Understand ACES, PCES, and effects of quarantine
3. Understand the impact of trauma and COVID-19 on students when they return to school
4. Learn how schools can prepare for students to return
5. Discover interventions/accommodations for specific problems that may arise
6. Considerations in trauma assessment
7. Provide PAR resources to add to your trauma toolkit
Trauma Defined
History of Trauma

• 19th Century—hysteria & dissociative phenomena
• After WWI—“shell shock syndrome”
• 1942—Lindemann and Parad—Contemporary trauma theory
• Vietnam War
• 1980 DSM-III®—PTSD was included
• Complex trauma/Developmental trauma disorder
**DSM-5® Definition PTSD**

- PTSD used to be under anxiety
- Now under Trauma and stressor-related disorders
- The person was exposed to:
  - Death or threatened death
  - Actual or threatened serious injury
  - Actual or threatened sexual violence
    1. Direct exposure
    2. Witnessing, in person
    3. Indirectly
    4. Repeated exposure during professional duties
Complex Trauma

- Herman (1992) suggested “Complex PTSD” diagnosis
- Courtois’ definition
  - “inability to self regulate, self organize, or draw upon relationships to regain self integrity,” which is associated “with histories of multiple traumatic stressors and exposure experiences, along with severe disturbances in primary care giving relationships.”
  - Complex Trauma can lead to:
    - Substance abuse
    - Unemployment
    - Homelessness
    - Impact on all psychosocial aspects of living

(Ringel & Brandel, 2012)
Types of Trauma

Acute trauma
- Generally, single event
- Sudden, unexpected
- More familiarity
- More typically covered under PTSD definition

Complex trauma
- Chronic problems of childhood
- Interpersonal trauma
- ACE study
- Now showing long-term impact
- “Chronic” trauma
- “Developmental” trauma
ACEs, PCEs, & Effects of Quarantine
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
THE BEGINNING

• Dr. Vincent Felitti and Dr. Robert Anda
• Started as an obesity study with Dr. Felitti
  – Obesity is a protective factor
  – Losing weight brought anxiety and vulnerability
• Research turned to addictive behaviors
  – Also coping mechanisms for early childhood trauma
ACEs Study

• Drs. Felitti and Anda teamed with Kaiser Permanente
• Research officially began 1995–1997
• Baseline survey: $N = 17,241$
• Followed for more than 15 years
• First results published in 1998
• Followed by more than 70 other studies through 2015
• Still growing!
ACE Questions
(All refer to respondent’s first 18 years of life)

Abuse
• Emotional abuse
• Physical abuse
• Sexual abuse

Household challenges
• Mother treated violently
• Substance abuse in the household
• Mental illness in the household
• Parental separation or divorce
• Incarcerated household member

Neglect
• Emotional neglect
• Physical neglect
How common are ACEs?

ACE Study

- ZERO: 36%
- ONE: 26%
- TWO: 16%
- THREE: 9.5%
- FOUR OR MORE: 12.5%
Results

• The MORE exposure to ACEs, the more likelihood of:
  – Health risk behaviors
  – Disease
  – Early death

• ACEs are related to seven of the leading causes of death in the U.S.
Increased risk of...

- Smoking, alcoholism, drug use
- Depression and suicide attempts
- Sexually transmitted disease
- Impaired job functioning
- Homelessness
- Criminal involvement
- Obesity
- Physical problems (heart, lung, liver disease, and cancer)
- Premature death
## 0 ACEs vs. 4 ACEs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factor</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>242%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obesity</td>
<td>222%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>357%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illicit drug use</td>
<td>443%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injected drug use</td>
<td>1,133%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STDs</td>
<td>298%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted suicide</td>
<td>1,525%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholism</td>
<td>555%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)

- Have a great influence in promoting positive health
  - Getting needed social and emotional support or
  - Flourishing as an adult
- Positive health attributes may reduce the burden of illness
- PCEs may have lifelong consequences for mental and relational health despite co-occurring adversities such as ACEs
PCEs

- Children are more likely to have better mental health, a lower risk of depression, and healthier relationships in adulthood if they are able to:
  - Talk with family members about their feelings
  - Feel that their families stand by them during difficult times
  - Enjoy participating in community traditions
  - Feel a sense of belonging in high school
  - Feel supported by friends
  - Have at least two nonparent adults who take genuine interest in them
  - Feel safe and protected by an adult in their home
General Effects of Quarantine

- Financial loss; socioeconomic distress
- Concern about becoming infected or transmitting the virus
- Boredom
- Frustration
- Sense of isolation
- Poor information from public health authorities
- Lack of transparency about the severity of the pandemic
- Anger and anxiety
- Avoidance of crowds
- Vigilant handwashing

(Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013; Brooks et al., 2020; Cava et al., 2017; Jeong & Song, 2016)
Effects of Quarantine in Children

• Education disrupted—Nationwide school closures in 188 countries (91.3% of totaled enrolled learners)  
  https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

• Many children are hungry—22 million children rely on school for at least one meal. Results in stress, poor physical health, poor mental health, academic problems, social problems  
  https://www.nokidhungry.org/who-we-are/hunger-facts
Effects of Quarantine in Children

• Vulnerable to secondary impacts of the pandemic on our society
• Stress in the home as a result of job loss, economic insecurity, and uncertainty
  – Increases risk of domestic violence—1 in 15 children in U.S. exposed and 90% of children witness it [https://ncadv.org/statistics](https://ncadv.org/statistics)
  – Social distancing could result in a rise in trauma for children as abusers tend to isolate their victims from friends and others
Effects of Quarantine in Children

- Children unable to access supports that help them cope, including friends, activities, teachers, freedom of movement, being in school
- Not all children had access to the same learning opportunities while at home: lack of capacity, financial resources, lack of/poor internet access
  
https://time.com/5803355/school-closures-coronavirus-internet-access/
Psychological Effects of Quarantine in Children

- Confusion
- Anger
- Boredom
- Stigma
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Infection fears
- Difficulty eating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Posttraumatic stress symptoms
- Trauma-related mental health disorders
- Exacerbation of existing psychiatric symptoms
Impact of Trauma on the Brain
# Brain Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brain area</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hippocampus</td>
<td>Memory, emotional responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amygdala</td>
<td>Emotional regulation, social judgment, fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corpus callosum</td>
<td>General IQ, problem solving, visual–spatial, sleep, somatic complaints, social functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerebellum</td>
<td>Balance, coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal lobe</td>
<td>Language processing, auditory processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontal lobe</td>
<td>Higher mental processes: thinking, decision making, planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brain Development

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
Return to School: What Can We Expect as a Result of COVID-19 and Trauma
Health

A higher prevalence of:

– Obesity
– Depression, anxiety, suicide
– Sexually transmitted diseases
– Cancer
– Diabetes
– Heart disease
– Lung disease
– Premature death
Learning

Students may have difficulties with:

– Memory
– Attention
– Cognition
– Focusing, organizing, processing information
– Feelings of frustration and anxiety
– Executive functions
Learning

• Lower GPA
• 2.5 times more likely to fail a grade
• Higher rate of school absences
• Increased risk of dropout
• Decreased reading and writing ability
• Lower scores on standardized achievement tests
Learning

Kids with ACE score of 3 or higher:
– 48% reported low engagement in school
– 44% had trouble staying calm and controlled in the classroom
– 49% had difficulties finishing tasks
– 23% were diagnosed with learning disabilities

(Murphey, D. & Moore, K., 2014)
Significant Adversity Impairs Development in the First Three Years

Source: Barth et al. (2008)
Relationships/Social Skills

Students with high ACE scores have difficulties:

- Trusting others
- With boundaries
- Controlling impulsivity and being overly reactive
- Understanding and interpreting emotions
- Interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication
- With self-awareness
Behaviors

**Fight**
- Rapid, unexpected mood shifts
- Dysregulation
- Hyperactive, reactive, impulsive
- Aggressive
- Defiant

**Flight**
- Withdrawal
- Escape/running away
- Social isolation

**Freeze**
- Constricted emotions
- Overcompliance/denial of needs
- Perfectionism
- Dissociation
Root of Challenging Behavior

- Pain or discomfort
- Frustration
- Anxiety
- Not understanding
- Distrust/fear

Find out WHY
Return to School

What Can We Expect?
Wide Range of Reactions

- No concerns
- Academic backslide
- Social challenges
- Emotional concerns
- Behavioral difficulties
Academic Backslide

- Varying home support
- Inconsistent teaching methods
- A lot depends on internal student motivation!
Academic Backslide—Reading

Reading

School Closure
Typical Last Day

RIT Score

8th Grade
7th Grade
6th Grade
5th Grade
4th Grade
3rd Grade

Sept 1 Oct 1 Nov 1 Dec 1 Jan 1 Feb 1 Mar 1 Apr 1 May 1 Jun 1 Jul 1 Aug 1 Sept 1

Typical Growth/Summer Loss
COVID Slowdown
COVID Slide
Academic Backslide—Math

![Graph showing academic progress and backslide in mathematics](image-url)
Social Challenges

- Too clingy
- Withdrawal
- Making and keeping friends
- Not following social distancing guidelines
Emotional Concerns

- Grief over loss and/or events
- Increased psychological distress
- Irritability, anxiety, depression
- Pre-existing mental health concerns may worsen
- “It’s OK not to be OK”
Behavioral Difficulties

- Nightmares
- Difficulties eating and sleeping
- Excessive focus on activities
- Regressive behaviors
- Increased irritability, anger, aggression
- Self-harm
Prepare for Return

What Schools Do to Prepare for the Fall
Resources

- Publish resources for procedures
- Have crisis plan in order
- Plan for students who need to stay at home
- Employee training
Medical Plan

• Follow recommendations by health departments, WHO, CDC
• Adhere to “stay home when sick” regulations
• Monitor annual school health requirements
• Have school health staff and mental health staff involved in planning for reopening
Mental Health Plan

• Train employees
• Plan for students who require mental health support
• Contact students who do not return to school
• Plan for school avoidance
• Publish procedures for students who report:
  – Suicidal ideations
  – Homicidal ideations
  – Home abuse
• Address stigma
Interventions—General

- Show empathy and patience
- Calmly set limits
- Assure safety
- Provide age-appropriate information
Promote Resiliency

The Four Rs

• Relationships
• Reassurance—safety and caring
• Routines—provide familiarity and structure
• Regulations (emotional)—learn how to cope

Resilience can be taught!
Promote Positive Psychology

• Positive emotions
• What do we have control over?
• Gratitude
• Savoring
• Kindness
• Self-compassion
Grief and Mourning

- Students will have varied experiences
- Can mourn over things and activities
- Listen, validate feelings
- Avoid telling your own stories to children
Trauma Assessment
State of Affairs in Trauma Assessment

• An estimated 50%-60% of children will experience some significant trauma in their lives as a result of any of a multitude of events including accidents, physical abuse, chronic neglect, and sexual assault, to name a few (NCTSN, 2012).

• January 2020 PAR trauma market research results ($N = 331$):
  – Clinical practitioners conducted more trauma assessments than school practitioners, $\chi^2 (1) = 49.66, p = .00, \varphi = -.387$.
  – Over half of survey respondents are already conducting evaluations that includes some assessment of trauma; the majority include a comprehensive ratingscale.
  – Trauma assessments are initiated at multiple points, but most frequently during a psychological or psychoeducational evaluation. This is to be expected as school psychologists complete an average of 60 psychoeducational evaluations (initial and reevaluations) per year.
Considerations in Trauma Assessment

- Why trauma assessment?
  - Can determine history of trauma, trauma-related symptoms, if further assessment is needed, types of interventions needed
- Early identification leads to more positive outcomes
- Universal screening
- Individual screening
- Individual assessment
- Guidance document: [Guidance for Trauma Screening in Schools](#) (written by NASP leaders Katie Eklund and Eric Rossen in conjunction with National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice)
Assessment Domains

• Many areas are affected by trauma: memory, executive function, behavior, depression, and anxiety

• Comprehensive assessment considers:
  – Relationships and attachment
  – Thinking and learning
  – Self-regulation (behavioral/emotional control)
  – Self-concept
  – Resiliency
Trauma Assessment Resources: PAR Is Here to Help
Essentials of Trauma Informed Assessment and Intervention in School and Community Settings

Kirby Wycoff & Bettina Franzese

https://www.parinc.com/Essentials

White paper:
Trauma Talk: An Interview with Childhood Trauma Expert Dr. Kirby Wycoff
Books Available from PAR

The Neuropsychology of Stress & Trauma

Steven G. Feifer, DEd

www.parinc.com/NeuroStressTrauma

Blog:
Feifer Offers Insight Into Trauma, What Schools Can Do to Help
Trauma Instruments

Rating Scales

• Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC)
• Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC)

Screeners

• Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children Screening Form
• Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children Screening Form
Ages 8–16 years
Self-report
54 items, 15–20 minutes
Six clinical scales:
  Anxiety
  Depression
  Anger
  Posttraumatic Stress
  Dissociation
  Sexual Concerns (optional)
Available in Spanish
Ages 3–12 years
Caretaker report
90 items, 20–25 min
Eight scales:
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Anger/Aggression
  - Posttraumatic Stress-Intrusion
  - Posttraumatic Stress-Avoidance
  - Posttraumatic Stress-Arousal
  - Dissociation
  - Sexual Concerns
Available in Spanish
Resilience/Strengths Instruments

- Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS)

- Risk Inventory and Strengths Evaluation (RISE)
Resilience/Strength Instruments

Ages 5–18 years
Teacher, parent forms
Separate self-report forms
  Ages 8–12 years
  Ages 13–18 years
Four scales:
  Self-Regulation
  Social Competence
  Empathy
  Responsibility
Additional PAR Assessments Related to Impact of Trauma

- parinc.com/BRIEF2
- parinc.com/BERS2
- parinc.com/ChAMP
- parinc.com/PSI4
- parinc.com/PAI_A

- parinc.com/RADS2
- parinc.com/RCDS2
- parinc.com/RCMAS2
- parinc.com/Roberts2
- parinc.com/SRS2
PAR Addresses Customer Needs

• PAR’s response to the pandemic includes:

• Guidelines for telehealth practice using PAR products
• Increase in PARiConnect products including digital administration and scoring
• Paper stimulus books converted to digital stimulus books
• Remote versions of tests
What’s Next and Resources
What’s Next

• Educate yourself
• Educate others
• Participate
NASP Resources

COVID-19 Resource Center


Sections on:
• Return to School
• Special Education
• Crisis & Mental Health
• Families & Educators
CDC Resources

This site is for K–12 schools:

George Washington University

Resources for response to COVID-19

http://healthinschools.org/schools-and-covid-19-resources-2/#sthash.k2cqazJZ.IGDA5eVz.dpbs
National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH)

Resources for returning to school

http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/COVID-19/
Self-Care for Student Support Professionals

Self-Care During COVID-19

10-page printable guide—can help with self-care, but also with talking tips and guidelines for helping others

Remember: everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. 9 times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won’t make you angry. It will break your heart.

— Annette Breaux

TheCornerstoneForTeachers.com
Terri Sisson, EdS
Educational Assessment Advisor
tsisson@parinc.com
813.428.4920

Carrie Champ Morera, PsyD, NCSP, LP
Project Director
cmorera@parinc.com
References